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## **An Anti-Democracy Foreign Policy: Guatemala** **by Jacob G. Hornberger**

Unfortunately, the CIA “success” in Iran, which produced the CIA’s [ouster of Iran’s democratically elected prime minister](#), bred a CIA “success” in another part of the world, Latin America. One year after the 1953 coup in Iran, the CIA did it again, this time in Guatemala, where U.S. officials feared the communist threat even more than they did in Iran.

This time, the target was the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz, a self-avowed socialist whose domestic policies were in fact modeled after the socialist New Deal policies of U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt.

Arbenz’s socialist mindset had driven him to adopt an “agrarian reform plan,” a type of land-distribution scheme that unfortunately is all too common in Latin America. The plan entailed the confiscation of a portion of land owned by a major U.S. corporation operating in Guatemala at that time, United Fruit, and its redistribution to Guatemalan peasants. While the plan was an almost perfect embodiment of the socialist concept of taking property from the rich to give to the poor, in actuality it was no different in principle from the wealth-redistribution revolution that FDR’s welfare-state concept brought to America, whereby the primary purpose of the federal government became taxing the income of the rich in order to redistribute the money to the needy (or, in reality, to the politically privileged).

So Arbenz had two strikes against him already as far as the CIA was concerned — his belief in socialism and his confrontation with a major U.S. corporation that had strong allies in the U.S. Congress. His third strike knocked him out — his unwillingness to obey U.S. government orders to rid his government of self-avowed communists.

Consequently, flush with the “success” of its coup in Iran the year before, in 1954 the CIA secretly organized and engineered a military coup in Guatemala that ousted the democratically elected Arbenz from power. Schlesinger and Kinzer write:

The United States organized, financed, and equipped the invasion forces. U.S. personnel flew the rebel aircraft and filled the airways with bogus transmissions suggesting a much larger force had invaded. Unrelenting U.S. diplomatic and political pressure encouraged treason and demoralized supporters. CIA assets in the officer corps and the administration worked actively to undermine President Arbenz’s authority and block efforts to move against the rebels.

Unaware that the CIA was orchestrating the military coup against him, throughout the crisis Arbenz turned to the U.S. government for help, innocently placing his faith in a government that was purportedly committed to advancing democracy. On Sunday, June 27, 1954, democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz was ousted from office and fled Guatemala. The CIA replaced him with an unelected Guatemalan military dictator, Col. Carlos Castillo Armas, whom the CIA designated the “Liberator” of the Guatemalan people.

Canceling the presidential election scheduled for 1955 and continuing “emergency” suspension of civil liberties, including freedom of the press, Castillo Armas retained the unwavering support of the U.S. government. A year after taking office, he visited Washington, where he was warmly greeted by Vice President Richard Nixon and, not surprisingly given that he was a military man, was accorded the privilege of reviewing a U.S. military honor guard with Nixon at his side. Nixon visited Guatemala in 1955, declaring that “this is the first instance in history where a Communist government has been replaced by a free one.”

The CIA's new “free” regime lasted for three years. Plagued by corruption, chaos, dissent, and violence, the Castillo Armas regime came to a violent end in 1957, when the CIA’s “Liberator” was assassinated by one of his guards, who supposedly committed suicide immediately after killing the president.

Castillo Armas was then followed by a succession of U.S.-approved Guatemalan military regimes, regimes whose military men, over the years, would be trained in torture, assassination, and counter-insurgency techniques at the Pentagon’s infamous [School of the Americas](#). The CIA-induced Guatemalan coup and the four decades of brutal, torturous, U.S.-government-supported military rule that came with it precipitated a civil war in Guatemala that would last some 40 years and ultimately take the lives of more than 200,000 Guatemalan people.

In their 1982 book, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer write,

The [Historical Clarification Commission], which was headed by a German lawyer, Christian Tomuschat, estimated that the conflict had caused more than 200,000 deaths, and blamed the military for 93 percent of them. In a speech presenting the report, Mr. Tomuschat said that while he and his fellow commissioners knew when they began their work more or less what had happened during the conflict, “no one of us could have imagined the dimensions of this tragedy, not even the Guatemalan commissioners who had lived through the experience directly.”

“It is with profound sadness that the commission learned of the extreme cruelty with which many of the violations were committed, of the large number of girls and boys who were victims of violent cruelty and murder, and of the special brutality directed against women, especially against Mayan

women, who were tortured, raped and murdered,” Mr. Tomuschat said. “State security forces blindly pursued the anti-Communist struggle without respect for any legal principles or the most elemental ethical and religious values.”

In 1999, President Clinton, visiting Guatemala, candidly admitted, “For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake.”

What if the CIA had not intervened in the domestic affairs of Guatemala? What if it hadn’t violently ousted its democratically elected president? What if it had not installed a series of brutal U.S.-approved military dictatorships in Guatemala? What if it had simply stayed out of the natural democratic progression in Guatemala, letting regularly scheduled national elections to take place in 1955, one year after the coup? Schlesinger and Kinzer write,

Had Arbenz served out his term, the opposition might well have been strong enough to contest and even win the 1955 elections. Although a distinct minority, the conservative opposition had both money and organized religion on its side.... In short, the democratic option — however uncertain its results — was still open to Guatemalan conservatives in 1954. The U.S. intervention gave them an opportunity to win by opting instead for the security of authoritarian repression. In taking this path, they condemned their country to four decades of unremitting brutality and violence.

The CIA’s easy “success” in Iran and Guatemala then drove it to seek regime change in Cuba, where President Fidel Castro’s steadfast refusal to do the bidding of U.S. officials led not only to the Bay of Pigs disaster but also to the U.S. government’s 45-year obsession with ousting Castro from power. (While Castro is an unelected communist dictator, it has never been a lack of democracy in Cuba that has driven the U.S. government’s obsession with ousting him from power. Instead, the obsession is rooted in Castro’s longtime, steadfast commitment to keeping Cuba independent of U.S. government control, unlike other Latin American regimes, both elected and unelected, which consider it an enormous honor and privilege to be a well-paid vassal in the U.S. government’s vast overseas empire.)

Then, in 1973, faced with the democratic election of another self-avowed socialist in Latin America, Salvador Allende, the CIA supported his violent military ouster and the installation of a military strongman into power, Gen. Augusto Pinochet. I wrote about Pinochet’s U.S.-supported 17-year reign of murder, torture, and terror in my recent article “[U.S. Regime Change, Torture, and Murder in Chile.](#)”

In 1971, after drifting across Europe with his family and then living for a time in Uruguay and Cuba, Jacobo Arbenz died while residing in Mexico. A broken man by that time (his 25-year-

old daughter had committed suicide with a revolver in 1965), the official cause of Arbenz's death was that he had died of natural causes (he drowned in his bathtub) but some people had doubts about that explanation.

In 1996, the long Guatemalan civil war, which had its roots in the U.S. government's anti-democracy coup in 1954, finally came to an end with the signing of a peace accord. As Schlesinger and Kinzer put it in the Afterward to the 1999 edition of their book *Bitter Fruit*, "The longest war in Latin American history had come to an end." But not without a high price, not least of which included the lives of more than 200,000 people and the brutal torture of countless more at the hands of U.S.-supported and Pentagon-trained military regimes.

A deep-seated culture of violence has taken root in Guatemala. Military regimes, army units and police squads have set an awful example, teaching entire generations that terror and murder are appropriate ways to achieve both political and personal ends. For their crimes they have enjoyed nearly complete immunity, as the police and judicial systems exist to serve the unjust ruling order....

[With the signing of the 1996 peace accord] a long and bleak winter has ended in the supposed land of eternal spring, and that is a genuine cause for rejoicing. The terms of public debate have shifted dramatically, with even many conservatives openly accepting the need for change in terms that would have been considered subversive only a few years ago. Now begins the long task of rebuilding a shattered land, not simply politically and economically but also morally. It will take all the efforts of the long-suffering Guatemalan people, and all the help the outside world can give them, to consolidate the great victory they have won and finally drive a stake through the heart of darkness that terrorized them for so many years.

Since the 9/11 attacks, U.S. officials have consistently maintained that foreigners hate "us" because of our "freedom and values." Rather than accepting that official mantra, Americans would be better served by studying the history of the U.S. government's foreign policy, including its anti-democracy "successes" in Iran, Guatemala, and Chile, to get a grasp on why so many people around the world hate the U.S. government — and to appreciate why the only solution to America's woes lies in a dismantling of the interventionist empire that currently holds our nation in its grip and in a restoration of a non-interventionist republic that guided the founding of our nation.

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